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A Fresh Start? The Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2016

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Abstract

As voters across Northern Ireland went to the polls on 5 May 2016, it was by no means obvious that they were participating in a landmark election. The preceding campaign was largely lacklustre, voters were largely uninspired, and competition for votes was largely along predictable ethno-national lines. The DUP and Sinn Féin retained their positions as the dominant unionist and nationalist parties respectively, while the UUP and SDLP struggled to retain their existing support, let alone expand it. The cross-community Alliance Party remained stagnant in fifth place. However, these ostensive signs of continuity with previous elections mask deeper signs of substantive change. The establishment of Northern Ireland's first official opposition within current structures and the publication of a draft Programme for Government (PfG) framework within a month of the election are indicative of a new era in consociational power-sharing. Meanwhile, the growth in support for smaller parties, a further fall in voter turnout and an audible debate around social issues suggest at least a partial decline in the salience of the ethno-national dimension in the electoral arena.

Keywords: Northern Ireland Assembly; elections; campaign; political parties

Background

When the Northern Ireland Assembly reached the end of its fourth mandate in March 2016, a collective sigh of relief filled the air around Stormont. It was only the second time in Northern Ireland's brief post-Agreement history that its devolved institutions had successfully completed a full term, and the first to see two consecutive mandates run their course.¹ That the institutions withstood heavy political turbulence over the preceding five years renders the milestone significant in itself. The decision by Belfast City Council in December 2012 to fly the Union Flag on only designated days, replacing the *ex ante* policy of flying it every day of the year, sparked widespread street protests by loyalists across Northern Ireland. This decision, by increasing the salience of ethno-national tensions, saw significant damage to the already fragile relations among Executive parties, particularly between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin.² Faced with decision-making gridlock and a breakdown in trust between the parties around the Executive table, American diplomats Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan were invited to chair inter-party talks on three specific areas of controversy: the flying of flags, the regulation of parades, and contending with the legacy of the past.

The Haass-O'Sullivan talks commenced in late September 2013 but broke down by the end of the year. Commenting on their failure, Haass voiced his concern that violence could return if 'politics are not shown to be making progress' (BBC News, 2014). The gravity of paralysis at the heart of government was not lost on Northern Ireland's leaders. In a frank admission, First Minister Peter Robinson deemed Stormont 'no longer fit for purpose' (Robinson, 2014). Attempting to avert the outright collapse of Northern Ireland's devolved institutions, the British and Irish governments took a more interventionist approach by jointly convening fresh talks.

These talks bore tentative fruit: all five parties of the Executive signed the Stormont House Agreement in December 2014 (Northern Ireland Office, 2014). It constituted some progress on the ‘conflict’ issues of flags, parading and the past, as well as additional issues of institutional and welfare reform.

However, the implementation of Stormont House was derailed by two critical developments. First, Sinn Féin decided to block the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill through the Assembly, arguing that it did not offer sufficient protection for the most vulnerable in society (BBC News, 2015a). The then Finance Minister Arlene Foster warned that a failure to reach agreement on welfare reform would result in an unsustainable £500 million black hole in the Executive’s budget (BBC News, 2015b). Second, trust between the parties reached a new low when Northern Ireland’s Chief Constable announced a suspected link between the murder of a prominent republican and the Army Council of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) in August 2015. This prompted the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to withdraw its sole minister from the Executive, claiming that Sinn Féin was in a state of ‘denial’ about republican paramilitarism (Ulster Unionist Party, 2015).³ The move placed pressure on Sinn Féin to clarify its commitment to the democratic process, and on the DUP to consider its own position in a power-sharing Executive with Sinn Féin. Accordingly, the former reaffirmed the IRA to be ‘gone and not coming back’ (Sinn Féin, 2015). The latter, meanwhile, responded with the creative use of procedural tactics to prevent the Executive from holding a meeting. To some, the move was a clever way of holding Sinn Féin accountable for republican paramilitarism without risking the outright collapse of the Assembly; to its critics, the DUP was accused of playing ‘a new version of the Hokey Cokey’ (BBC News, 2015c).⁴

In predictable fashion, the result of these twin crises was a new series of inter-party talks. The two largest parties worked out their differences to reach the Fresh Start Agreement (Northern Ireland Office, 2015). In what was essentially a revised version of Stormont House, the new agreement contained changes to the implementation of welfare reform to satisfy Sinn Féin and a new set of principles against paramilitarism to satisfy the DUP. Both parties had a vested interest in reaching a deal: Peter Robinson, having experienced health difficulties earlier in the year, was rumoured to be planning his retirement and did not want his legacy to be defined by the collapse of Stormont. Meanwhile, by investing heavily in devolution and the peace process, Martin McGuinness needed something to show for his party's belief that 'the political institutions are the best way forward' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2015).

The other parties were unconvinced. Alliance leader David Ford derided Fresh Start as a 'half-baked' deal that failed to deal with the legacy of the past (BBC News, 2015d). The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) argued that Sinn Féin conceded too much on welfare reform, and the Ulster Unionists described the agreement as 'anything but' a fresh start (Rainey, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the most scathing criticism of the deal came from arch-critic of power-sharing and leader of the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), Jim Allister: 'Such was the DUP's desperation to delay an election that any deal would do' in order to 'cling' to power (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2015). The pre-election stalls were set. The DUP and Sinn Féin had renewed their vows, while their challengers would seek to portray their governing partnership as a failed marriage of convenience.

The Campaign

As in previous elections in Northern Ireland, ethno-national divisions organised competition within the respective unionist and nationalist blocs to generate a largely intra-communal contest (see, for example, Evans and Tonge, 2009). Those seeking evidence of a major post-conflict restructuring of competition along cross-community lines are likely to remain disappointed. Historically, unionist voters tend only to consider voting for unionist parties and nationalist voters tend only to choose between nationalist parties, with little sign even of lower voting preferences being awarded to parties outside of one's ethno-national bloc (Mitchell, 2014). There are, however, some tangible signs of at least a reduction in the salience of the ethno-national dimension, with signs of pre-election coordination, particularly between the DUP and Sinn Féin in the wake of the Fresh Start Agreement, a greater focus on social issues, and a largely (by Northern Ireland's standards) amicable campaign. Indeed, as one correspondent observed, 'In [the] past 25 years, I've covered many bitter, nasty elections. This one was different. [It] was relatively good-natured' (Simpson, 2016).

In a campaign characterised by a mixture of the old and the new, there was a similar blend of continuity and change among key personnel. Three of the five main parties entered the election with different leaders to the previous Assembly contest. Arlene Foster replaced Peter Robinson as leader of the DUP to become First Minister in January 2016, the first woman to hold the position.⁵ Former news anchor Mike Nesbitt replaced Tom Elliott as leader of the Ulster Unionists in March 2012, and the youthful Colum Eastwood replaced Alasdair McDonnell six months before polling day to lead the SDLP. Martin McGuinness, the last remaining minister of the inaugural power-sharing Executive of 1998, led Sinn Féin into an Assembly election for the fifth time. Alliance contested an Assembly election for the fourth time under

David Ford's leadership, with deputy leader Naomi Long playing a notable campaign role.

Leadership mattered. Recognising that its leader's popularity exceeded that of the party as a whole, the DUP's strategy contained one common denominator: Arlene Foster. At the launch of her party's manifesto, Foster announced five 'bread and butter' pledges: to prioritise health spending, create more jobs, protect family budgets, raise standards in education, and invest in infrastructure (BBC News, 2016a). A relatively uncontroversial set of priorities, the DUP used subsequent campaign opportunities to focus attention not just on the issues themselves, but rather their owner. This was *Arlene's* five-point plan, DUP candidates were branded as *Arlene's* candidates, and the overarching message was to 'Keep *Arlene* as First Minister' (emphasis added). Such a personality-centric strategy would have been unthinkable had Peter Robinson remained party leader going into the election. Whereas Robinson's political currency had been hit by a series of controversies, exacerbated by a prickly relationship with the media, Foster assumed her new role from a position of relative strength. Viewed as a safe pair of hands by her party faithful, she had developed a reputation as a competent minister. More generally, as a former MLA for the Ulster Unionists, a Church of Ireland congregant and, indeed, a woman, Foster was able to present herself as a 'different kind' of DUP leader. Her more relaxed public persona only reinforced the clean break from her predecessor's tenure.

Not everyone saw the DUP's approach under a different style of leadership as particularly refreshing. Indeed, the message to 'Keep Arlene as First Minister' was much less positively articulated by some of her colleagues. Deputy leader Nigel Dodds warned that the prospect of Martin McGuinness emerging as First Minister would be 'a seismic shock to politics in Northern Ireland and a devastating blow to

unionism to be defeated at the Assembly elections' (Dodds, 2016). Dodds argued that a split in the unionist vote would leave a nationalist as 'the public face of Northern Ireland both in the United Kingdom and overseas' (McBride and Young, 2016). To some, the warning invoked the 'sectarian card'. The UUP decried the tactic as 'dog-whistle politics' (Ulster Unionist Party, 2016), while the TUV's Jim Allister urged voters not to play into the DUP's 'scaremongering ... designed solely to obtain votes by duress' (*News Letter*, 2016a).

For its part, Sinn Féin made no secret of its desire to see Martin McGuinness returned as First Minister, but stressed the role was substantively equal to that of deputy First Minister. Indeed, Mr McGuinness had previously expressed his willingness to rename the positions 'Joint First Ministers' if his party earned the right to nominate a First Minister (Hughes, 2015). On a policy level, Sinn Féin's manifesto exuded considerable synergy with that of the DUP. Its pledges to create 50,000 new jobs and invest an extra £1 billion in healthcare were identical to those of its unionist partner. Acknowledging the notable overlap, McGuinness called it 'a clear indicator to people ... that at least we and the DUP are getting our act together' (McDonald, 2016). By unveiling a series of harmonized policy pledges before the election, Sinn Féin's approach reflected sheer pragmatism. On the one hand, particularly in the wake of the Fresh Start Agreement, Sinn Féin and the DUP were mutually dependent in their attempt to show that only they could bring about stable, effective government. On the other hand, the preeminence of ethno-national voting behaviour meant that Sinn Féin and the DUP could exploit each other's dominance in order to strengthen their own; their competition for votes was with rivals within their respective communal blocs, not with each other.

The Ulster Unionists accused the DUP and Sinn Féin of ‘arrogance’ for portraying the Assembly election as a mere two-horse race (Manley, 2016). Declaring his own ambition to be First Minister, Mike Nesbitt put education at the heart of the UUP’s manifesto, vowing to do more to promote integrated education and introduce a new transfer system for primary school pupils. The SDLP’s flagship campaign announcement also focused on social policy. In a withering critique of child poverty and children growing up in homes with little savings or assets, Colum Eastwood announced his party’s plans to give newborn children a £500 payment towards future savings (Social Democratic and Labour Party, 2016). The cross-community Alliance Party repeated its stance that sectarian divisions are holding Northern Ireland back from realising its full potential. Its manifesto outlined ‘five quick steps to move Northern Ireland forward,’ such as dealing with paramilitarism and redirecting money away from policies which maintain sectarian divisions towards frontline services (Alliance Party, 2016).

The leaders of the five main parties communicated their pitches to the wider public in two televised debates. Mike Nesbitt and Colum Eastwood were widely credited with strong performances, but neither managed to inflict a fatal blow on their respective rivals. Perhaps the fundamental weakness inhibiting the UUP, SDLP and, indeed, Alliance from mounting a more credible challenge to the DUP and Sinn Féin was summed up by Martin McGuinness’s barb at his younger nationalist challenger: ‘I am going into government. Colum [Eastwood] can’t say that tonight’ (McAdam, 2016). For the first time in an Assembly election, parties faced a new strategic consideration. As part of the institutional reforms reached in the Fresh Start Agreement, the two largest parties committed themselves to legislating for an official opposition. This, somewhat unexpectedly, cleared a major obstacle to a private

member's bill tabled by John McCallister, an independent unionist, and so the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill was passed just before dissolution. After this election, parties *entitled* to enter government under the d'Hondt formula could now *choose* to enter an official opposition instead.⁶ Neither the SDLP, UUP nor Alliance took the plunge before the election to unequivocally state that they would take this choice. This was, conceivably, a lost opportunity to boost their electoral prospects.

Perhaps as a sign of the times, social issues gained a newfound prominence in campaign discourse, particularly among younger voters. With the election taking place some eighteen years after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, a new generation growing up in post-conflict Northern Ireland was eligible to vote for the first time. The BBC accordingly hosted a special televised debate in which an audience of eighteen-year-olds could pose their questions to representatives of the five main parties. Beyond an initial discussion on the continued relevance of the 'green versus orange' divide, two issues sparked intense interest: abortion and same-sex marriage. These issues also emerged in the debates party leader debates, but it would be reasonable to suggest asymmetrical salience of these issues between younger and older age cohorts.

The social positions of the five main parties were divided, and not neatly along ethno-national lines. Strongly influenced by evangelical Christianity, the DUP was the only major party opposed to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland; its new leader reaffirmed the party's 'traditional views' (McBride, 2016). Together with the SDLP it did, however, support the establishment of an Assembly working group to review the law on abortion on grounds of fatal foetal abnormalities (FFA). Sinn Féin and Alliance supported an extension of abortion

availability on grounds of rape, incest and FFA. On same-sex marriage, the SDLP took a more liberal position by joining Sinn Féin and Alliance in supporting its legalisation, despite the risk of alienating some of its traditionally conservative Catholic supporters (see Evans and Tonge, 2014). The Ulster Unionists defined both matters as issues of conscience, thus refusing to adopt an official position. In practice, however, the voting records of the UUP's incumbent MLAs demonstrated a strong preference for the status quo over reform on either of the two controversial issues.

Lingering in the background of the election campaign was an additional hot-button issue: membership of the European Union (EU). Fulfilling a pledge in his party's manifesto the previous year, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that a referendum on Britain's future membership of the EU would be held on 23 June 2016, seven weeks after devolved elections in London, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Despite looming large on the horizon, however, the subject failed to garner much attention from the local parties until after the Assembly campaign. The weak salience of 'Brexit' in this election likely reflects a combination of factors. At a practical level, political parties (and the media) seem to have decided against overwhelming voters with concurrent campaigns on both devolved and European issues.⁷

At a strategic level, political actors perhaps calculated that there was little to be gained from raising European issues due to a net convergence of preferences between Northern Ireland's main parties: in a display of cross-community agreement, Sinn Féin, the SDLP, Ulster Unionists and Alliance all endorsed the United Kingdom's continued membership of the EU. With the DUP being the only major party to advocate leaving, it is possible that pro-European parties were affected by a sense of complacency. Another possibility could be that the DUP and UUP avoided

competing with each other on the European issue due to internal dissent within both parties. For example, some of the UUP's candidates for the Assembly openly rejected its position on the upcoming referendum, notably Harold McKee in South Down, while the DUP's Simon Hamilton has since refused to say which way he voted in the referendum, leading to speculation that he supported Remain (BBC News, 2016b). Given the UUP's longstanding quest to differentiate itself from the DUP, its failure to accentuate a distinct position on Europe was perhaps an early sign that the smaller unionist party had not yet done enough to present itself as a convincing alternative to its larger rival.

The Results

The results brought little in the way of change at Stormont, with the mutual dominance of the DUP and Sinn Féin over their respective ethno-national rivals undiminished. For the DUP in particular the election proved nothing short of a triumph. Even with a drop in its first preference vote share, the party matched its 2011 tally of 38 seats (see Table 1). Such an outcome confounded widely-held expectations that the party would sustain some losses, mainly due to 38 seats being considered a non-replicable high water mark. The party's two-headed campaign strategy of emphasising Arlene Foster's personal (bordering on *presidential*) appeal while simultaneously rolling out the tried and tested bogey-man of a Sinn Féin First Minister clearly proved a highly effective one. Its adroitness at vote-management under PR-STV was also, as in previous contests, exemplary. 86 percent of DUP candidates were elected, a figure that also accounts for a head-to-head contest between two rival DUP candidates in Mid Ulster.

DUP success meant inevitable disappointment for its principal electoral rival, the UUP. By only matching its 16-seat haul from 2011, the party failed to make the in-roads into the unionist vote that many had predicted. Indeed, the UUP recorded its lowest ever vote share (13.2 percent), down 0.7 percent from 2011. Mike Nesbitt confirmed his party's frustration by revealing a pre-election target of 18-19 seats. Such optimism likely stemmed from UUP gains in the 2014 local government and 2015 UK general elections (see Matthews, 2015; Tonge and Evans, 2015). Those results now appear a blip in what has been a sustained electoral decline since 1998.

Table 1: Summary Northern Ireland Assembly Election Results: 2016 and 2011

Party	Seats 2016	Vote Share 2016 (%)	Seats 2011	Vote Share 2011 (%)
DUP	38	29.2	38	30.0
Sinn Féin	28	24.0	29	26.9
UUP	16	12.6	16	13.2
SDLP	12	12.0	14	14.2
Alliance	8	7.0	8	7.7
Green	2	2.7	1	0.9
PBPA	2	2.0	0	0.8
TUV	1	3.4	1	2.5
Ind.	1	3.3	1	2.4
Ukip	0	1.5	0	0.7
PUP	0	0.9	0	0.3
Cons.	0	0.4	0	0.4
NILRC	0	0.2	-	0.2
Others	0	1.0	0	0.2

Source: The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, <http://www.eoni.org.uk/>

While recovery at Assembly-level proved elusive, the election did bring some positives for the UUP. The three seats lost to defections during the previous mandate were reclaimed with the minimum of fuss. The seat won at the expense of the DUP in

Lagan Valley also proved an especially sweet, albeit small, victory.⁸ Mike Nesbitt also enjoyed some personal campaign success, topping the poll in Strangford. Holistically, however, the election failed to constitute serious progress for the UUP and while its decline at Assembly-level may have been arrested any resurgence was checked by a resolute DUP.

On the nationalist side, Sinn Féin enjoyed a curious election. Its drop in vote share (by 2.9 percent) was the largest suffered by any of the five executive parties. The party secured 28 seats, a loss of one from 2011. For several reasons this could be considered an impressive return. The party was operating at a high level of success – its 29 seats of 2011 as much a high water mark as the DUP's 38. Its focus, energy and resources also appeared more keenly directed to elections and events in the Republic of Ireland (see Barrett, 2016). Viewed in that light, what Sinn Féin had going into the election it essentially held. That said, the assessment of many observers was that a decline in vote share – itself set against the background of a larger slump in the overall nationalist vote – should be of concern to Sinn Féin's leadership and supporters. This was the first Assembly election in which the party failed to record any gains. For a party that has long campaigned on a platform of sustained and relentless progress towards Irish reunification, any electoral losses, however small, are significant (see Mitchell, 2015: ch.4). In the eyes of some, this result raises questions about both Sinn Féin's claims to be able to bring about Irish reunification in the short to medium term and the appetite of the northern nationalist electorate for such a scenario. This logic was identified by one local commentator: '[Sinn Féin] has conflated itself with the cause of a united Ireland to an unwisely inflexible extent, making any setback for one an off-putting setback for the other' (Emerson, 2016).

The more critical readings of Sinn Féin's election also focused on the nature of those who benefited from its losses. The runaway success of the anti-austerity People before Profit Alliance (PBPA) candidate, Gerry Carroll, in West Belfast was interpreted as a clear rebuke from previously loyal Sinn Féin supporters over the party's decision to agree to welfare reform measures contained in both the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements. The success of Carroll's colleague, Eamonn McCann, in Foyle – thwarting a Sinn Féin gain in the constituency – was interpreted in a similar fashion. On socio-economic issues, Sinn Féin appear to have been outflanked on its left side by the PBPA and its charismatic co-leaders. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Sinn Féin's failure to reach the (ambitious) target of 30 seats deprived it of the power to unilaterally veto legislation in the next Assembly mandate. Above all, however, it was the 2.9 percent decline in vote-share that was the takeaway headline from Sinn Féin's performance.

Sinn Féin would find some salve for its modest setbacks in the continued decline of its nationalist rival, the SDLP. From an already very low base, the SDLP lost two seats and experienced a 2.2 percent drop in vote share. Unlike its unionist counterpart, the UUP, the party shows no sign of being able to stop the electoral rot and stabilise its vote. Perhaps the starkest indication of the SDLP's decline came with the prospect (seriously countenanced in the early stages of the count) that it might even fall below the threshold for a place at the Executive under d'Hondt. While the party eventually avoided such ignominy, thanks to some wafer-thin victories in several constituencies, 2016 represented yet another electoral nadir. One positive for the SDLP could be found in its avoidance of even greater losses. A leaked internal party report from 2015 had prophesied a loss of five seats (Manley, 2015). A more positive reading of the SDLP's election might also consider the slight regeneration of

its Assembly team, with several long-serving incumbents replaced by younger colleagues. It would be safe to say, however, that the main challenges for the party moving forward concern more fundamental matters, such as message and purpose, than personnel.

As with the other outgoing Executive parties, the Alliance Party saw a decline in its share of the vote, down 0.7 percent from 2011. The party remained, however, on eight seats, a total short of a pre-election target of 11 and which left it ineligible for an Executive seat under d'Hondt. The long-awaited electoral breakthrough for the cross-community party, therefore, once again failed to materialise. Again, too, the party's support base was concentrated almost exclusively in eastern (and predominantly unionist) constituencies. Elsewhere, the Green Party boasted the biggest vote increase of any party (1.8 percent), returning an extra MLA. Clare Bailey's success in competitive South Belfast reflects a strong local campaign and a sufficiently concentrated and receptive audience to her party's liberal socio-moral positions and left-wing economic policies. The constituency's cosmopolitan profile and large student population no doubt played a helpful role to the Greens, and perhaps explains the party's much less pronounced progress elsewhere. Having challenged the dominant status of Sinn Féin and the SDLP in their traditional heartlands of West Belfast and Foyle respectively, the election also proved a success for the PBPA, with two of three candidates returned. The gains made by both the Greens and PBPA, albeit modest ones, could be interpreted as a product of these parties' generational appeal to younger voters, who are more likely to be attracted to their relatively liberal, leftist positions.

Independent candidate, Claire Sugden, surprised many observers by holding on to the East Londonderry seat she inherited in 2014. The TUV failed to translate a

0.9 percent vote increase into a seat gain, with leader, Jim Allister, remaining the party's sole MLA. Despite personally topping the poll in North Antrim, Allister declared the election a 'disappointment' (*News Letter*, 2016b). Questions were raised about the TUV's competitiveness in future Assembly contests, given its dependency on (the ageing) Allister's brand.⁹ Another party crafted in its leader's image, Ukip, also failed to make good on its promise of an electoral breakthrough in Northern Ireland. The party did, however, see its vote share more than double and it came close to winning a seat in East Antrim. Of the rest, the PUP remained mired in the electoral doldrums and the paltry returns for the Conservatives and the NILRC continue to demonstrate the enormous challenges faced by the main UK parties in making any credible electoral progress in Northern Ireland.¹⁰

Overall turnout in the election was 54.9 percent. Down 0.8 percent on the 2011 Assembly election, this was the lowest turnout in Northern Irish electoral history. In a wider UK context, where elections were also taking place for the devolved legislatures in Wales and Scotland, Northern Ireland was the only region to record a decrease in voter participation. In some quarters a decline of 0.8 percent would have been met with a degree of relief, as many feared a generally soporific campaign would result in a much higher drop in turnout (see *Belfast Telegraph*, 2016). The most notable feature of the turnout, as previously mentioned, concerned the difference in support for nationalist and unionist parties. The overall unionist vote was 51.5 percent, a 3.2 percent rise on 2011. The vast majority of the votes shed by the DUP and UUP had, therefore, clearly remained within the unionist party system. In contrast, turnout was down in all nationalist-majority constituencies, particularly westerly ones, leaving the new Assembly with its lowest nationalist representation since 1998. The combined Sinn Féin-SDLP vote fell by 5.1 percent to 36 percent. The

nationalist bloc could not match the homogeneity displayed by its unionist counterpart. The successes of the PBPA highlighted above, coupled with a decline in voter turnout in nationalist-majority constituencies, owed much to this leakage in the nationalist vote.¹¹

While changes to party strength were relatively modest, there was a much more discernible change to the Assembly's gender composition. 27 percent of the 276 candidates in the election were women, a 10 percent increase on 2011. Significantly, not only did parties field more female candidates than in previous elections, particularly the unionist ones, but they appear to have been fielded in more winnable seats. A total of 30 women (28 percent) were successful in their bid for election, marking a 50 percent increase in the number of women MLAs. Even though the Assembly still lags behind its Welsh and Scottish counterparts in terms of political gender equality, it performs comparatively well in these islands.¹² The percentage of women MLAs at Stormont now mirrors that of women MPs at Westminster (29 percent) and outperforms Dáil Eireann, where just 22 percent of TDs are women.

Executive formation

The process and choreography of forming an executive were transformed by the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements and new legislation establishing opposition structures and necessitating pre-coalition agreement on a draft Programme for Government (PfG). This legislation also set a deadline of two weeks after the first meeting of the new Assembly for the nomination of ministers. Following the count, speculation quickly mounted about the respective willingness of the UUP and SDLP to enter into a governing coalition with the DUP and Sinn Féin. All-party negotiations over the PfG lasted two days before the UUP announced that it could not sign up to

the programme and, as a result, it would be entering into opposition. Mike Nesbitt, therefore, became the first official leader of the opposition at Stormont since 1972. With Nesbitt's cry of 'let battle commence', the spotlight immediately swung to the SDLP's position (Devenport, 2016). This was arguably a more torturous decision for the SDLP than the UUP, not least because of the symbolism of a nationalist party (voluntarily) occupying the opposition benches at Stormont. The party came under pressure from Sinn Féin 'to stand by the principles of the Good Friday Agreement' and take its place in the Executive (*Sinn Féin*, 2016). Colum Eastwood would eventually announce that the SDLP would be availing of the new opposition arrangements, citing his party's desire to offer a 'progressive alternative' to a DUP-Sinn Féin government (Manley, 2016b). Running alongside the PfG negotiations were talks aimed at finding an occupant for the Justice ministry – a politically sensitive portfolio exempt from the d'Hondt process and previously held by Alliance. With another election looming if a government could not be formed by the 26 May deadline, the DUP and Sinn Féin met with the Alliance Party, the Greens and the independent MLA Claire Sugden to discuss their respective demands for taking the post. The Alliance Party would eventually remove itself from the running, citing its dissatisfaction with what it regarded to be an excessively vague PfG. Finally, on the eve of the deadline, Sugden announced her acceptance of the position, paving the way for the nomination of the Executive and the publication of the first draft of the PfG.

Her appointment brings the total number of women around the Executive table to four (40 percent), the highest it has ever been.

Conclusion

The 2016 Assembly election should go down as a game-changer. While precious little actually changed in the way of party support – with the DUP and Sinn Féin remaining the dominant duopoly – the formation of an official opposition at Stormont constitutes an historic moment. In refusing their places on the Executive the UUP and SDLP have spared themselves the conundrum and associated strategic agony of critiquing a government of which they are a member. Opposition, conceivably, provides both parties with the opportunity and space to differentiate themselves from their larger communal rivals and more effectively scrutinise the DUP-Sinn Féin working relationship and the sincerity of their ‘fresh start’. A less favourable assessment of the UUP and SDLP’s decision, of course, would argue that by eschewing government office they have consigned themselves to five toothless years of political obscurity. It is either a brave or foolish party that voluntarily refuses a place in government and the assorted accoutrements that come with it. What the two parties make of their time in opposition will depend, of course, on a multitude of factors (too many to countenance here). Whatever transpires, for better or worse, power-sharing government in Northern Ireland has entered a new era.

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Notes

¹ At five years in duration, it was also the longest single mandate of the post-Agreement Northern Ireland Assembly. With the passage of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act (2011) by Westminster the general election to the United Kingdom Parliament and elections to the devolved administrations would have occurred on the same date, 7 May 2015. To avoid national and devolved elections being held concurrently, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland postponed the Assembly election by twelve months; future Assembly elections are now to be held every five years.

² The decline in trust between the DUP and Sinn Féin was exemplified by Peter Robinson's 'Florida Letter' in the summer of 2013. Faced with growing pressure from within his party, he penned an open letter from his American holiday home to announce the withdrawal of the DUP's support for the redevelopment of the former Maze Prison site (Robinson, 2013). As strong supporters of the construction of a Peace and Reconciliation Centre at the site, Robinson's unilateral announcement was met with anger by Sinn Féin.

³ Sinn Féin was closely associated with the Provisional IRA. The party's links to the paramilitary organization had influenced its 2005 announcement to 'put weapons beyond use', leaving Sinn Féin to pursue republican aims through democratic means. The alleged existence of an Army Council, therefore, raised uncomfortable questions for the party.

⁴ Four of the DUP's five ministers resigned from the Executive on 10 September 2015, only to be renominated the following week and then resign again immediately. The process was repeated for over a month, thus leading to comparisons with the 'Hokey Cokey', a folk dance in which participants repeatedly move in and out of a circle.

⁵ Arlene Foster previously served as Acting First Minister in 2010 and 2015 respectively.

⁶ Political parties could previously refuse to accept a ministry. Indeed, the UUP withdrew from the Executive in September 2015. However, the subsequent provisions under John McCallister's Private Member's Bill ensure that the party (or parties) of opposition are officially recognized as such. For example, official status confers additional speaking rights, resource entitlements, and the right to chair the Public Accounts Committee.

⁷ There were concerns among the First Ministers of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales that the date of the EU referendum (23 June) would fall too soon after elections to the devolved legislatures seven weeks earlier. In a joint letter they called for the referendum to be delayed to avoid "confusing issues at a moment when clarity is required" (cited in Cowburn, 2016). The letter, of course, had no substantive impact.

⁸ The victor, Jenny Palmer, was a former DUP councillor who resigned from the party following a high-profile dispute with senior party figures.

⁹ This was perhaps best demonstrated by the party's choice of election poster, with Allister's image superimposed on the shoulder of each TUV candidate.

¹⁰ The Northern Ireland Labour Representation Committee (NILRC) is a breakaway party established by members of the Northern Ireland branch of the Labour Party. The National Executive of the Labour Party ruled against standing candidates in the Assembly election.

¹¹ The PBPA designates as 'other' in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

¹² 35 percent of MSPs in the Scottish Parliament are women. In the Welsh Assembly that figure is 42 percent.